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Egyptian Etiquette: A Historical Rebuttal to The Genealogy of Morals

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies

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ABSTRACT
In his book Genealogy of Morals, German philologist and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche posits an understanding of the origin and development of morality that stood in stark contrast to the common understanding of his day. Rather than presuming the existence of some metaphysical, objective reality to morality, Nietzsche outlines a natural development and evolution to the concepts of “Good,” “Bad,” and “Evil” throughout a nebulously defined period of history, focusing primarily on the psychological conditions surrounding the advent of morality. Following this, he wrote The Antichrist, in which he provided a far more specific historical framework within which the development of these concepts took place. In this thesis, I will examine his account of this development and compare his genealogy to the historical record of Ancient Egypt. In doing so, this project will explore some of the critical points of weakness in his arguments, specifically attending to how his usage of history potentially undermines his psychological theories, and how, likewise, his psychological theories undermine his historical arguments.

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Introduction

In his book *Genealogy of Morals*, German philologist and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche posits an understanding of the origin and development of morality that stood in stark contrast to the common understanding of his day. Rather than presuming the existence of some metaphysical, objective reality to morality, Nietzsche outlines a natural development and evolution to the concepts of “Good,” “Bad,” and “Evil” throughout history. In this paper, I will examine his account of this development and compare his genealogy to the historical record of Ancient Egypt, pointing out a chronological problem with the account in the *Genealogy*. Following this, since some scholars question the historical veracity of the *Genealogy*, I will introduce the historical outline of events as found in *The Antichrist*, since Nietzsche explicitly indicates that it is to be read as the companion piece to the *Genealogy*. With that established, I intend to indicate a further issue that extends beyond the problem of chronology. Following the accounts of both the *Genealogy* and *The Antichrist*, I intend to show how the moral writings from Egypt’s Old and Middle Kingdoms call into question Nietzsche’s declaration that the development of slave morality requires its proponents to be oppressed by an external environment that is hostile to them. ¹

I. The Origin of “Good” and “Evil”

¹ All quotations from the *Genealogy of Morals* and *Beyond Good and Evil* come from Friedrich Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 2000), and will be referenced as *GM* and *BGE* (respectively) followed by the number of the section being referenced or quoted. All quotations from *The Antichrist* come from Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Group, 1977), and will be referenced as *A*, followed by the number of the section being referenced or quoted.
In his *Genealogy of Morals*, Friedrich Nietzsche critiques the general understanding of morality held by the predominately Christian Europe of his day. Namely, the belief that morality is both objective and universal. His criticism of this notion is twofold. First, he claims that those who had attempted to discuss the history of morality had “bungled their moral genealogy” by ignoring the facts surrounding the development of moral ideas.\(^2\) It is not that the psychologists and philosophers have failed to properly date the events of which they speak, but rather that the concepts they discuss as occurring within specific periods of time are, themselves, anachronistic. Beyond this, however, Nietzsche also posits that the “historical untenability” of their thinking is equaled by its “psychological absurdity.”\(^3\) Therefore, not only have both his contemporaries and predecessors failed to acknowledge the proper course of development of moral ideas through history, but the anachronistic theories they propose are, themselves, absurd. As such, his dissatisfaction served as the launching point for his own investigation into the true history of morality.

In his pursuit of the true nature of morality’s development, Nietzsche traces the etymological development of the words “good,” “bad,” and “evil” across different languages and cultures throughout history. Nietzsche claims that this method of observing the connotations of each word was “the signpost to the right road.”\(^4\) As a result of his digging, Nietzsche finds that, in all of the ancient languages he observed, the term “good” carried with it the same idea of a powerful, aristocratic position of authority. Likewise, the term “bad” was simply the absence of what was “good;” that is, weak and

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\(^2\) GM I:2.  
\(^3\) GM I:3.  
\(^4\) GM I:4.
plebeian. These stood in stark contrast to the Christian morals which pervaded Europe during the nineteenth century. With this realization in mind, Nietzsche posits his own psychological history of how these notions eventually developed into the moral ideologies present in his day.

In a nebulously defined period of history, Nietzsche claims that humanity was roughly divided into two classes: The masters and the slaves. The masters were those who were the strong, wealthy, and aristocratic individuals to whom the connotations of their words indicated. They distinguished themselves by virtue of their superiority to the remainder of their societies. For Nietzsche, this designation was sometimes indicated by a specific trait which symbolizes their superiority, such as wealth or physical possessions. The masters were naturally self-concerned, with their care of others extending only insofar as it benefited themselves. By virtue of their strength, they were able to directly change the world around them to fit their desires. As such, they possessed the ability to decide how words were used, and what their associations would be. So when they looked upon their own lives—especially in contrast to the weak, subjugated alternative—they called their way of living “good.” This term was not born out of some abstract notion of morality, but rather out of their simple enjoyment of being the ones in charge. “Good” was little more than an expression of their preferences rather than an

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5 GM I:4.
7 GM I:5.
8 Morrissom, 663-664. See especially: “In the minds of the masters, good does not designate that which achieves the best for the community but instead expresses pleasure at the possession of certain characteristics.”
appeal to some sense of what they viewed to be right or wrong. This, for Nietzsche, is why the oldest terms for “good” carry the connotations previously listed.

As the masters began to exercise their power, one of the primary ways in which they did so was through the subjugation of others. This is where the second class of humanity—those Nietzsche calls the “slaves”—began to appear. These individuals were, especially when brought into comparison with the masters, weak and poor, lacking many (if not all) of the qualities that defined the masters. From the perspective of the masters, the slaves appear shackled by cowardice, anxiety, and pettiness. The fact that they cannot rise up and alter their circumstances makes them the object of disdain of the masters. So when the masters observed the situation of the slaves, they dubbed it “bad,” exercising their “lordly right of giving names.” But this pronouncement carried no more moral weight than “good” did, nor was it a reaction to any specific quality the slaves possessed that the masters found undesirable. For the masters, “bad” was synonymous with “not like us,” which itself was synonymous with “undesirable.” The term “bad” was a negative term that simply meant “not good” (using the definition of good previously outlined), similar to how darkness is not a substantive thing, but is simply the absence of light. Therefore, Nietzsche posits, while the terms “good” and “bad” existed, they were entirely amoral terms that merely indicated the masters’ preference for their strength and authority and their aversion to the weakness of the slaves. Throughout history, this dynamic played out with the masters consistently maintaining their position of power over the slaves. After an indefinite amount of time, however, the slaves revolted.

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9 *GM* 1:2.
10 *BGE* 257.
11 *BGE* 260.
12 *GM* 1:2.
Contrary to the violent uprising that the terminology of “slave revolt” might bring to mind, this revolt was not fought with swords and slings. In spite of the desire to physically overthrow the masters, the slaves were too weak to do so successfully. As such, the slaves began to grow bitter at their own inability to exact revenge on the masters. This bitterness, because it could not be expressed externally against the masters, turned inward upon the slaves themselves in the form of what Nietzsche refers to as ressentiment.13

The revolution, for Nietzsche, began when the slaves, fueled by ressentiment, began reevaluating the relationship between themselves and the masters.14 At the forefront of this reevaluation were a caste of individuals Nietzsche labels the “priests.”15 These priests would become the means by which the “morality” of the masters would be subverted and replaced by the morality of the slaves. And it is here that Nietzsche explicitly posits the notion that the revolt in morality is directly linked to the Jewish priests.16

It is to the Jews in general and their priests in particular that Nietzsche ascribes the advent “slave morality.”17 The creation of this morality occurred when the priests—in response to their oppression by the masters and their inability to do anything about it—

13 Nietzsche uses the French term ressentiment intentionally. With resentment, once whatever is causing it is settled or rectified, resentment dissipates. Ressentiment, on the other hand, connotes a feeling that continues even after the situation has been resolved. Thus, Nietzsche uses it to more accurately capture the meaning he is trying to express. The French term also happens to catch the eye when reading, drawing attention to the fact that, for the previous reason, Nietzsche is not talking about resentment. See Christa Davis Acampora. “Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morality: Moral Injury and Transformation.” In The New Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche, edited by Tom Stern, 222-246. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. For specific discussion of its usage, see especially pp. 228-229.

14 GM I:10.

15 GM I:7. See also BGE 195.

16 GM I:7. See also BGE 195.

17 This is not to state, as is often misunderstood, that Nietzsche is antisemitic. In truth, Nietzsche is quite hostile to those who are antisemitic, even going so far as to break off his long-standing friendship with Richard Wagner after the latter adopted such a stance. See GM I:7 and BGE 195.
developed the notion of “evil” to be a form of intellectual rebellion. They took the terms of “good” and “bad” that the masters used and reversed them. They declared that their lowly, poor, and humble situation was good, and that the masters were not bad (which merely connoted an undesirable state), but evil.\textsuperscript{18}

The creation of the concept of “evil,” brought along with it the notion of a standard external to all things by which people were judged. This external standard stood in stark contrast to the “morality” of the masters, who merely acted upon their personal predilections. This, for Nietzsche, laid the groundwork for the eventual creation of Christianity, which he views as the most insidious form of slave morality.\textsuperscript{19}

II. Reaction: The Heart of Ressentiment

With this established, I would like to focus in on the specific nature of how slave morality is formed. Specifically, that it is a \textit{ressentiment}-fueled reaction to the circumstances the Jewish slaves found themselves in. Nietzsche is explicit in positing this dynamic. As he puts it, “in order to exist, slave morality always first needs a hostile

\textsuperscript{18} GM I:11.

\textsuperscript{19} While a sufficiently comprehensive explanation of Nietzsche’s view of Christianity as the most insidious form of slave morality is beyond the scope of this paper, the primary reason for this view, as he develops through the course of the second essay of \textit{The Genealogy of Morals}, is that Nietzsche views Christianity as offering a solution to the problems of slave morality, when in reality it only drives the issue deeper. To explain, Nietzsche claims that all people have inherit drives that slave morality condemns. Because of this, one feels bad for possessing the drives that naturally occur. When Christianity is thrown into the mix, it posits that all people are inherently sinful because of Adam’s disobedience. Sin, in this lens, can be both in deed and in thought. Thus, people feel guilty for something that was not their fault and for possessing natural inclinations. Beyond this, one also feels guilty for not living up to the seemingly impossible standards that Christianity espouses. Then, since humanity could never live up to those standards, God Himself descends to the world and pays Himself the debt humanity owed. So not only are people in debt to God due to Adam’s sin and their own, but now they are \textit{doubly} in debt due to God paying Himself for that debt. This act took a debt that might have been able to be paid for oneself and hurls it far beyond what anyone could ever repay even if given a hundred lifetimes.
external world; it needs, psychologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all—
*its action is fundamentally reaction.*\(^{20}\)

This reactionary nature can be clearly seen by observing how *ressentiment*
interacts differently with people of different dispositions. In spite of the close association
that Nietzsche posits between the slaves and *ressentiment*, the masters—albeit far less
frequently—are also susceptible to experiencing *ressentiment*. As Reginster points out,
“Nietzsche regards *ressentiment* as a *normal* response to frustration.”\(^{21}\) However, since
the masters are able to actively and directly respond to whatever has caused them
frustration, *ressentiment* is only a temporary feeling that can be resolved.\(^{22}\) The slaves, on
the other hand, are “denied the true reaction, that of deeds” because of their weakness.\(^{23}\)
Because of this, the feeling of *ressentiment* takes on a new dimension. Now not only are
the slaves enraged that they are being thusly oppressed by the masters, but they feel an
overwhelming hatred of their own inability to do anything about it.\(^{24}\) It is due to this
intolerable feeling of impotence that they have to “compensate themselves with an
imaginary revenge.”\(^{25}\)

This revenge was manifested in the revaluation of values. As Nietzsche states,
“The slave revolt in morality begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives
birth to values.”\(^{26}\) So, the feeling of *ressentiment*—born out of the combined hatred the
slaves hold both for their oppressors and for their own inability to escape their

\(^{20}\) *GM* I:10. Italics added for emphasis.
\(^{21}\) Bernard Reginster, “The Psychology of Christian Morality: Will to Power as Will to
\(^{22}\) *GM* I:10.
\(^{23}\) *GM* I:10.
\(^{24}\) *GM* I:7
\(^{25}\) *GM* I:10. See also Reginster, 708.
\(^{26}\) *GM* I:10.
oppression—demanded an outlet of some kind. That outlet was the development of slave morality. Since the slaves could not physically change their situation, they sought to psychologically revalue their current position. In doing so, they inverted the values of good and bad, and replaced the latter with the notion of “evil.”

It is important to note that even the revaluation itself was reactionary. The masters’ definition of good was derived positively and directly. They experienced something pleasurable and named it “good” simply because it was pleasurable. They had no other point of reference in the process. For the masters, “bad” was merely an afterthought. They did not make any list of opposing values. They affirmed what was good, and whatever did not line up with that just happened to be “bad.”

The slaves, on the other hand, came to their conception of good negatively and indirectly. The slaves first dubbed the object of their hatred—the masters—as evil. Only after this had been established did the slaves dub themselves good. As such, the slaves’ definition of good was simply “not evil” (much like how the masters arrived at bad being defined as “not good”).

In summary, the slaves experienced ressentiment specifically because of two coinciding factors. First, they were oppressed by the masters, which elicited the natural response of ressentiment. But where the masters would have been able to vanquish whatever oppression they experienced, the slaves were incapable of doing so. As such, their ressentiment took on a new dimension. Rather than merely being frustrated at their oppression, the slaves began to develop a hatred at their own inability to actionably

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27 *GM* 1:11.
28 Acampora, 228-229.
29 Acampora, 228.
respond. This is the particular quality of *ressentiment* when it interacts with what Nietzsche calls the “weak and impotent.”\(^{30}\)

### III. Egyptian Etiquette

With Nietzsche’s stage thusly set, it stands that if one could find evidence to the contrary, indicating that *ressentiment* is not necessary for the development of slave morality, that would pose a significant problem to his system.\(^{31}\) It is to this end that one might look to Egyptian literature. Specifically, when one considers the writings of Ancient Egypt, one finds a surprising amount of moral literature from its earliest periods. These moral writings come primarily in one of two forms. The first is a category of writings sometimes referred to as “Didactic Literature.” These were poetic treatises composed either by or for the ruling class of Ancient Egypt, serving as guidance for how kings and viziers ought to live. These often came in the form of “Instructions,” with the author’s name included in the title either as the author or, in some cases, as the recipient. Within these writings, one finds a detailed description of how Egyptian nobility were expected to carry themselves, especially with relation to those beneath them.

The other form of moral writings come from the inscriptions from tombs. Becoming more popular in the Fifth Dynasty (approximately 2450 BC to 2300 BC), these works provided autobiographical proof of a life well lived became far more widespread throughout Egypt.\(^{32}\) As Egyptologist Miriam Lichtheim states, “a good moral character, a

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\(^{30}\) *GM* 1:10.

\(^{31}\) *GM* 1:10.

\(^{32}\) Dynastic dates constitute a field highly contested by Egyptologists. These dates, and all others regarding Egyptian Dynasties are taken from Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).
life lived in harmony with the divine order (*maat*) was equally essential. Thus, the affirmation of moral worth, in the shape of a catalogue of virtues practiced and wrongs not committed, became an integral part of the autobiography.”  

These inscriptions provide a key insight into what acts were considered virtuous enough to be given as proof of one’s worthiness for a continued existence in the afterlife.

Taking these forms of literature in turn, the *Instruction to Kagemni* was composed by a Vizier named Kagemni, “who served…the last king of the Third Dynasty and the first king of the Fourth.” This document is unique, as Kagemni (who is presumed to be the author) is posited as the recipient of the text. Regardless, within its lines Kagemni poses what it would look like for an individual to follow the ideal moral tenets. As he writes:

> The respectful man prospers  
> Praised is the modest one  
> The tent is open to the silent  
> The seat of the quiet is spacious  
> Do not chatter!  
>  
> No word can prevail against him  
> He who is gentle, even timid  
> The harsh is kinder to him than to his mother  
>  
> Let your name go forth  
> While your mouth is silent  
> When you are summoned, don’t boast of strength

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34 Lichtheim, 36. Using Lichtheim’s chronology, the Third Dynasty spanned the years from 2650 BC to 2600 BC. Likewise, the Fourth Dynasty lasted from 2600 BC to 2450 BC.  
35 Lichtheim, 36.  
36 Lichtheim, 94-95.
The moral virtues illustrated here are not what one would expect from Nietzsche’s masters. Rather, it idealizes many of the tenets of slave morality. Here, one sees virtues like respect, modesty, and timidity praised. Conversely, rather than openly taking pride in one’s power, the injunction presented here is the exact opposite: “When you are summoned, don’t boast of strength.”

Kagemni is not the only instance of this moral virtue. The Instruction of Ptahhotep was written sometime during the Fifth Dynasty by the Vizier Ptahhotep. Lichtheim’s introduction to this instruction notes that, while the list of brief stanzas do not make for a “comprehensive moral code,” they do, however, “touch upon the most important aspects of human relations.” Beyond this, the instruction also specifically focuses on the most important virtues a person could follow. As Lichtheim notes, “The cardinal virtues are self-control, moderation, kindness, generosity, justice, and truthfulness tempered by discretion. These virtues are to be practiced alike toward all people. No martial virtues are mentioned. The ideal man is a man of peace.” A few lines from the Instruction of Ptahhotep read as follows:

If you meet a disputant in action
A poor man, not your equal
Do not attack him because he is weak
Let him alone, he will confute himself
Do not answer him to relieve your heart
Do not vent yourself against your opponent
Wretched is he who injures a poor man

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37 Given the fact that the Egyptians of the Old and Middle Kingdoms were the predominant force in the region, as well as their extensive military campaigns and wide usage of slave labor, these people do, indeed, fit Nietzsche’s description of a master race. One can readily see the parallels between Egypt’s earliest history and the descriptions of masters that Nietzsche gives in BGE 257, 260, and GM I:5.
38 Lichtheim, 95.
39 Approximately 2450 BC to 2300 BC.
40 Lichtheim, 96.
41 Lichtheim, 96.
42 Lichtheim, 98.
This, again, provides an explicit command not to treat subordinates poorly, as well as the command not to “vent yourself against your opponent,” both of which blatantly contradict the ideals set out by Nietzsche’s notion of master morality.

Finally, the inscription found on the tomb of a Vizier named Nefer-Seshem-Re, one finds an appeal to the gods, made to prove that he was innocent of anything that might doom his soul to be snuffed out of existence. With such a significant matter in the balance, the virtues he extols become incredibly important. This document is believed to have been written sometime during the Sixth Dynasty of Egypt’s Old Kingdom. Nefer-Seshem-Re’s autobiographical appeal reads as follows:

I have come from my town
I have descended from my home
I have done justice for its lord
I have satisfied him with what he loves
I spoke truly, I did right
I spoke fairly, I repeated fairly
I seized the right moment
So as to stand well with people
I judged between two so as to content them
I rescued the weaker from the stronger than he
As much as was in my power
I gave bread to the hungry, clothes to the naked
I brought the boatless to land
I buried him who had no son
I respected my father, I pleased my mother
I raised their children

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43 Lichtheim, 98.
44 One might object to this claim, citing Nietzsche’s development of how “strong” individuals seek out conflict. Specifically, as Nietzsche states in Ecce Homo: “Equality before the enemy: the first presupposition of an honest duel. Where one feels contempt, one cannot wage war; where one commands, where one sees something beneath oneself, one has no business waging war” (EH “Why I Am So Wise,” 7). However, this statement is not made to describe the masters and their morality, but how Nietzsche himself approaches combatting the ideas that he addresses throughout his various books. In the paragraph leading up to this statement, he specifically states, “every growth is indicated by the search for a mighty opponent—or problem; for a warlike philosopher challenges problems, too, to single combat” (EH “Why I Am So Wise,” 7). As such, his discussion is limited to his method of attacking ideas (as noted in four steps following the former statement), not a description of how masters acted towards their subordinates. This fact is supported by his description of the masters being those who “hurled themselves upon weaker, more civilized, more peaceful races” (BGE 257).
45 Approximately 2300 BC to 2150 BC.
So says he whose nickname is Seshi.46 Once again, instead of finding lines touting his ability to conquer his enemies, we find Seshi saying that he “rescued the weaker from the stronger than he.”47 Rather than gathering all of the resources he could get his hands on, he “gave bread to the hungry, clothes to the naked.”48 Where he could have told the gods of his independence and ability to express his will upon the world, he writes of how he has “done justice for [his city’s] lord” and “satisfied him with what he loves.”49 These virtues are not at all what one would expect to be lauded by those in power before the revaluation of values took place. Here one finds those at the top of one of the most powerful kingdoms in antiquity boasting about their humility and charity; who are willing to stake the fates of their souls on how they obeyed and did not retaliate unfairly.

The system of ethics lauded by the Ancient Egyptians seems to be wholly out of place within the development of morality outlined within the Genealogy. Indeed, given the significant chronological disparity between the composition of the didactic literature quoted above and Nietzsche’s claim that slave morality was invented by the Jews, it seems to be problematic to presume that the order of events matched the history that Nietzsche suggests. The primary issue is, in short, that it appears as if the Genealogy doesn’t have room to interpret this evidence and, as such, is potentially much weaker in its claims to propose the actual development of morality.

IV. The Historicity of Morals

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46 Lichtheim, 49.
47 Lichtheim, 49.
48 Lichtheim, 49.
49 Lichtheim, 49.
The previous critique might, however, appear to be unfair, as the historical accuracy of the *Genealogy of Morals* has long been questioned. Regarding the historical merit of the *Genealogy*, scholars generally hold one of two opinions regarding the book. In the first camp, there are those who believe that Nietzsche genuinely believed the *Genealogy* to be a work of historical value. However, this position carries with it a whole host of issues due to certain personal prejudices that appear to inform Nietzsche’s treatment of history. For others, that Nietzsche seems to be playing fast and loose with the historical record has led them to believe that the precise details of when and where the slave revolt occurred are eclipsed by his focus on *why* it occurred. In short, they hold that it is a primarily psychological account. Following from the latter perspective, the introduction of Ancient Egyptian writing may seem like a mistake in category, akin blaming Jules Verne for erring in his calculations of gravitational forces in *From the Earth to the Moon*. Blaming him for this reveals that the criticizer has fundamentally misunderstood the purpose of his work. Similarly, some might claim that Nietzsche’s primary goal in the *Genealogy* is not correcting history, but constructing a narrative of the psychological development of morality throughout history.

“The problem with both approaches,” Jaggard states, “is the existence of *The Antichrist* itself.” Within the pages of the *Antichrist*, Nietzsche outlines a meticulously crafted narrative of Jewish history. This serves as the complimentary work to the

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53 Acampora, 223.
55 Jaggard, 344.
Genealogy, as Nietzsche himself indicates. As noted previously, Nietzsche’s primary grievance against his contemporary scholars rested in the fact that they had “bungled their moral genealogy” in two ways: One psychological, the other historical. Because of this, Nietzsche responded to each of these errors, the former in the Genealogy of Morals, the latter in The Antichrist. Thus, in order to gain a more complete understanding the point Nietzsche is making, one must read both the Genealogy (his psychological critique) and The Antichrist (his historical critique).

Given this, the following argument will be divided into three accounts. The first two sections will observe Nietzsche’s understanding of Jewish history as recounted in The Antichrist, relating it to the Egyptian documents above. The final section will follow a more psychological angle, detailing the relationship between the context of the above documents and the notion of slave morality being born of ressentiment. This is done with the intent of showing that even if we allow a more charitable reading to his writing, there are still possible problems with Nietzsche’s argument.

IV.1: Reaction and Revision

Within the pages of the Antichrist, Nietzsche outlines the precise historical context in which the slave revolt occurred, as well as provides the specific reasons behind what caused such an upwelling of ressentiment in the Jewish population that led to the creation of slave morality. In order to do so, he first sketches out a history of the Jewish people. Jaggard notes that, for his understanding of Jewish history, Nietzsche drew

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56 A 45.
57 GM I:2 and GM I:3.
58 Jaggard, 344.
Evans 17

primarily from the works of Julius Wellhausen. In a statement which, at first glance, seems to stand in remarkable contrast to *Genealogy*, Nietzsche claims that, “at the time of the kings, Israel also stood in the right, that is, the natural, relationship to all things.”

According to Nietzsche, the Jews of this era had no conception of the sin and guilt which typifies the slaves of whom he later writes. Worshipping Yahweh, Nietzsche claims, was an act of self-affirmation; the Yahweh of this period was the God who commanded Israel to conquer their neighbors and reign as the most powerful kingdom in the region. These Jewish masters, as it were, continued in their celebration of power for a long time.

However, two factors resulted in a dramatic shift in Israel’s relationship with Yahweh: “anarchy within, the Assyrian without.”

Providing the dates for the events to which Nietzsche is referring, Jaggard notes that there is a significant span of time covered in the previous phrase. The reference to “anarchy within” points to the split between Israel (in the north) and Judah (in the south) that occurred a few years after Solomon’s death, around 925 BC. The “Assyrians without” did not occur until the twelve years between 733 and 721 BC, when they conquered the northern kingdoms and demanded tribute from Judah. It is for this reason that Nietzsche writes that the “state of affairs long remained ideal, even after it had done away with in melancholy fashion.” The Jews in Judah remained unconquered until the Babylonian conquest of the Assyrian Empire in 587 BC.

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60 A 25. “The time of the kings” is the Davidic/Solomonic period, approx. 1010 to 930 BC.
61 A 25.
62 A 25.
63 Jaggard, 349.
64 A 25.
65 Relying on the sources Nietzsche was pulling from, Jaggard puts these as the dates Nietzsche would have been referring to. See Jaggard, 349.
At this point, Nietzsche claims that the Jews were faced with one of two possible courses of action. The God who had previously been the source of their victory over all of their enemies had, seemingly, abandoned them. As such, they could have accepted this new reality, even going so far as to begin worshipping the Babylonian gods, as it appeared that they were stronger. This, however, would be ridding them of the basis of their identity. Such an abandonment of the core of who they were, however, was an abhorrent thought. To admit defeat in battle was one thing; to admit defeat in identity—to say that one had been so profoundly defeated that their identity was no longer worth keeping—that was too much.

Therefore, they took the second option: Redefining their relationship with Yahweh. The caste of individuals at the helm of this redefinition was the Priests. As Nietzsche notes, “The concept of God becomes a tool in the hands of priestly agitators.” As a result of their work, the explanation for the defeat and exile of Judah shifts from being Yahweh’s abandonment the Jews to the Jews’ abandonment of Yahweh. With the introduction of morality and, with it, the concepts of sin and guilt, the Jews’ defeat is not

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66 See A 25. This is not to say that they actively deliberated on what course of action to take. Rather, it seems as if Nietzsche recognizes that they could have taken another path. However, from the Jews’ perspective, given how closely worship of God was associated with who they were as a people, abandoning Yahweh would be abandoning their identity.
67 It is worth noting, if only in passing, that Israel’s defeat was more profound than merely being conquered. The Israelites were conquered by the Assyrians, forced to pay tribute but allowed to remain on their own land. That was a profound blow that would have caused them to have been shaken to their core and might have even been enough to cause them to reconsider their relationship with Yahweh. But this defeat was wholly eclipsed when the Assyrians were, themselves, conquered. This proved that Israel had not been beaten by the greatest power (which may have, in some small way given them solace that it took the world’s strongest people to defeat them), but by a power that was, itself, conquerable. And more than being subjugated by the Babylonians, they were forced to relocate, their temple destroyed (this is Yahweh’s house, recall), and the walls around the city reduced to rubble. This was not a fragile sense of pride that was bruised—this was the complete and utter obliteration of a people and their identity.
68 Jaggard, 350.
69 A 24.
70 A 25.
71 A 25.
because Yahweh is weak or absent, but rather is the punishment for their disobedience. By wholly inverting what Nietzsche viewed as the natural order of the world, the Jews were able to maintain their own identity as Yahweh’s people. But both Yahweh and the Jews were radically altered in their nature. They had, in Nietzsche’s mind, become poor echoes, shadows of a former glory.

But one problem stood between the Jews and a complete revaluation: Memory. Under the reigns of David and Solomon, Israel had been the most powerful kingdom in the region. Memory of their days as conquerors rang in stark dissonance to this new understanding of morality. In Nietzsche’s words, “The whole history of Israel could not be used: away with it! These priests accomplished a miracle of falsification, and a good part of the Bible now lies before us as documentary proof.” Nielsen claims that the vast majority of the Old Testament was either intricately edited or entirely invented in order to cast their history in the light of their newly minted slave morality.

IV.2: Divine Debt

It is in light of this claim that I introduce the Egyptian literature above. Within the Old Testament, there are a number of points that the Jews were conquered or beaten in battle prior to their enslavement in Babylon. The first, and possibly most famous, of these instances is their enslavement to Egypt. If, as Nietzsche claims, this point in Israel’s history was entirely fabricated, it is worthwhile to notice that the priests chose Egypt—out of all of the surrounding societies at the time—as the first instance of their

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72 A 25.
73 A 26.
74 Jaggard, 351.
75 See basically the entire Book of Judges (2:14; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1, etc.).
enslavement. This appears to indicate the fact that Egypt was, at the very least, a believable candidate, potentially further reinforcing the notion that Egypt was a master society.

Beyond this, however, the Priests’ choice of Egypt is important in understanding Nietzsche’s claim of historical fabrication. If, indeed, Israel’s history was falsified, it is interesting to note that the Priests chose their liberation from Egypt to be the setting for the introduction of the Mosaic Law. The Law, using Nietzsche’s perspective, was the means by which the tenets of slave morality are codified in a divine legal language. The format of the Law emphasizes the kind of relationship that the Jews had with Yahweh in this era: He was the judge; their lives were the continuous trial. Within the Book of Exodus, it is after their liberation from Egypt that Yahweh delivers to the Israelites the Law. The reason that Yahweh repeatedly cites (most notably before the introduction of the Ten Commandments) as the reason for which they are to obey Him is because “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”76 This reinforced Nietzsche’s concept of slave morality being the internalization of the feelings of debt and guilt (which is the symptom of a moral debt).77

The implication of Yahweh directly delivering the Law through Moses points to two important facts. First, both the format of a series of laws and the fact that these laws were given directly to the Israelites by Yahweh points to the universality of the morality found within them. Either quality (format of laws or the fact that they came directly from Yahweh) would have been sufficient to convey the absolute, objective nature of these laws—that the Priests (in Nietzsche’s account) chose to do both reveals an immense

76 Exodus 20:2 NIV; see also Exodus 6:6, 13:3, 29:46, etc.
77 GM II:4.
desire to ensure that there are no exceptions, no regions or individuals that lie outside or above the authority of these laws. The second relevant note is the fact that the vast majority of these laws construct obedience to Yahweh in *negative* terms—i.e., following Yahweh is found in *not* doing a whole host of things.\(^{78}\) This, too, points to Nietzsche’s claim regarding the negative construction of slave morality—that it takes what one does *not* do and treats it as an accomplishment.\(^{79}\)

It is at this point that the Egyptian literature introduced previously becomes relevant. If we follow Nietzsche’s historical narrative within *The Antichrist*, the kind of enslavement he references as necessary for the upwelling of *ressentiment* would be found in the conquering of Judah by Babylon in 587 BC. If this is the case, and the Jewish Priests rewrote Jewish history to fit the narrative of their newly created slave morality, the implication becomes that prior to 587 BC, slave morality would not have existed. The passages of Didactic literature quoted above stand as potentially problematic exceptions to this claim, as the latest of them (the inscription of Nefer-Seshem-Re) was composed around at least 1,500 years prior to the Babylonian conquest.\(^{80}\) This point is exacerbated by the fact that the earliest of the quotes above (the *Instruction to Kagemni*) was composed just shy of 2,000 years before the Babylonian conquest.

Although Nietzsche’s treatment of history within the *Genealogy* is spurious, leading many scholars to treat is as irrelevant to the psychological point he is driving at, the existence of specific, datable events in *The Antichrist* remove the plausible deniability of any sincere link to history. By his own claim, the revaluation of values occurred at the

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\(^{78}\) Exodus 20:1-17; 22:21-31; 23:1-9, etc.

\(^{79}\) *GM* I:13.

\(^{80}\) See Jaggard, 349.
hands of the Jewish priests as they were held captive in Babylon, captivity which lasted from 587 BC to 538 BC, when Cyrus liberated them after his conquest of Babylon. If this is the case, moral writings such as those from the Old Kingdom period in Egypt, as noted above, pose a potential problem to Nietzsche’s claims, as they were composed at least over 1,500 years before the revaluation of values. As such, we have sufficient reason to doubt the historical veracity of Nietzsche’s claims.81

IV.3: Historical Reality

The Egyptian literature quoted above stands as an oddity within the context of Nietzsche’s narrative for a second and potentially more condemning reason, aside from the problem of chronology. As noted previously, Nietzsche emphasizes the fact that the origin of the revaluation of values (and, thus, the creation of slave morality itself) is ressentiment.82 Slave morality, for Nietzsche, cannot exist in a vacuum—“in order to exist, slave morality always first needs a hostile external world.”83 This is because ressentiment is based on the internalization of the hatred of one’s own impotence to enact the vengeance desired.84

This being the case, one might find it odd that Egypt, which stood as the pinnacle of power in the ancient world for centuries, would be the location in which some of the oldest written examples of slave morality were found. Especially during the Old Kingdom (the period from which the texts were taken), Egypt was at the height of its

81 One could argue that Nietzsche does not give explicit dates within the text of The Antichrist. However, the events to which he is referencing are easily datable. See Jaggard, 350-351.
82 GM I:10.
83 GM I:10.
84 Reginster, 708.
power. This was the time during which the pyramids at Giza were built. The king of Egypt (the term “Pharaoh” did not appear until the 1500s BC) was seen as a literal god descended from the heavens to rule on the earth. Further, Egypt met no significant militaristic resistance as they conquered the region from the Nile Delta to the Sudan. Lastly, the Old Kingdom did not fall to a conquering adversary, but to famine and drought. These were not a people from whom one would expect any kind of ressentiment. They were the conquerors, not the conquered.

This, again, raises the interesting question of where these moral writings came from. If, as Nietzsche indicates, slave morality exists only as the primary symptom of ressentiment, it becomes difficult to indicate a point during the Old Kingdom when Egypt would have experienced the kind of oppression necessary for slave morality.

What remains, then, is a series of writings, composed in a nation that was the dominant power of the region, written by high court officials (including some kings in later years) that laud the tenets of slave morality almost two thousand years before Nietzsche claims it existed. This oddity is doubly reinforced by the fact that within the Jewish narrative, Egypt is depicted as the oppressive nation from whom Yahweh saved them.

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85 Lichtheim dates this as approx. 2650-2135 BC.
86 Later periods, such as the Hyksos invasion, could provide a potential candidate for this, but, once again, this is far later than the dates of the inscriptions above. Lichtheim dates this around 1650 to 1550 BC.
87 Another writing, called The Instruction of King Amenemhet I for His Son Sesostris I (Lichtheim, 178-182) was composed during the Middle Kingdom, which spanned the years 2040 to 1650 BC (still over a thousand years before Nietzsche’s claim), stands as a fascinating document. Amenemhet I lauds his accomplishments to his son, claiming that he used his power as King to ensure that his people were well tended to, and that they were safe from natural predators. He writes, “I gave to the beggar, I raised the orphan / I gave success to the poor as to the wealthy” and “No one hungered in my years / None thirsted in them” (Lichtheim, 179, 180).
The psychological account of the origin slave morality is, as Nietzsche adamantly maintains, fundamentally grounded in *ressentiment*. Seeing as there are blatant chronological problems within Nietzsche’s work in *The Antichrist*, one could, for the sake of argument, imagine that the history found within Exodus is accurate, and it was there, rather than in Babylon, that the Jews constructed slave morality. Being oppressed by the Egyptians, the Jews, out of *ressentiment*, constructed a morality that was the opposite to that of their oppressors. The tenets of this morality are found throughout Exodus and are exactly the kinds of tenets Nietzsche would expect from a slave morality.\(^8\) However, once again, an issue arises when we take the Egyptian literature into consideration.

The Egyptians were the dominate force during the Old and Middle Kingdom periods. Because of this, they were in the absolute position of power to resolve upon any morality they desired. They were not reacting to any oppressive force—they, by and large, were the oppressive force. It is therefore wholly unexpected, when viewing history through Nietzsche’s lens, to find that at the *height* of their power, their moral system lauded many of the same tenets of slave morality, rather than the master morality Nietzsche would expect. As such, it appears that *ressentiment* is not a necessary condition for the development of slave morality, and some other understanding must be posited instead. Given his adamant claim that *ressentiment* gives birth to slave morality, this presents a major problem for Nietzsche’s general critique of morality.

**Conclusion**

\(^8\) Beginning in chapter 20, through the rest of the book.
As noted previously, Nietzsche’s proposition for the development of morality faces two significant issues when his outline is examined in the light of Ancient Egyptian didactic literature. First, the problem of chronology, as these writings, which espouse an ethical system that is remarkably similar to Nietzsche’s description of slave morality, were written over a thousand years before Nietzsche claims that the Jewish priests, exiled in Babylon, invented the notion of an objective morality. Second, the problem of ressentiment, as the Egyptians of the Old and Middle Kingdoms were some of the mightiest conquerors within the ancient world. It seems wholly unlikely that these conquering kings were in the position for ressentiment to take hold such that it mandated a revaluation of values. It stands at odds to Nietzsche’s account to suppose that the Egyptians of the Old and Middle Kingdoms, who were both desired and were able to oversee the construction of the Great Pyramids at Giza, were sufficiently oppressed to construct a slave morality. And yet, contrary to this, the various Instructions dictated by and for kings and viziers laud temperance, humility, and willing service to those above them. All these stand in opposition to the development of morality outlined in both the Genealogy of Morals and The Antichrist.
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